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Fertility, Reproduction and Conjugal Loyalty: Renegotiating Gender Relations amongst Dalits in Rural Tamil Nadu

Nitya Rao

Introduction

We will get affection and support from our husbands if we have children. It doesn't matter then if the parents-in-law squabble with us. Childlessness is however a matter of concern. Having children, at least two, is good, as others won't speak ill of us.

- 1 The above narrative from Mallika,¹ a 22 year old Madhari (Dalit) woman in rural Tamil Nadu, points to the centrality of reproduction for women's identities. Daughter of agricultural laborers, food scarcity at home made her begin working in a hosiery factory in Thiruppur at the age of 14. Married at 16, she continued to work in a mill, until her daughter, now five, was born. Now that she also has a young son of two, her husband, who works at a powerloom, wants her to stay at home to look after the children and family. He hands over all his income to her, confident that she will spend it well.
- 2 Mallika's narrative points to at least two important contributions reproduction makes to a woman's life: while her own desire for motherhood is not articulated, she speaks of gaining affection and support from her husband, and social approval. This concern for social respectability alongside conjugal loyalty raises the key question I explore in this paper. In a context of rapid socio-economic change, wherein Dalit women are not necessarily active in the workforce, are they being assimilated into brahmanical patriarchal ideologies that emphasize notions of honor and status (valuing virginity,

ritualizing puberty and glorifying marriage and motherhood—all of which seek to control women's bodies [Irudayam, Mangubhai, and Lee 2011])? Are they able to critique some of this morality and instead use it to maintain and negotiate reciprocal and equitable gender relations?

- 3 Much of the literature on Dalits, and Dalit women in particular, deals with issues of violence based on class, caste and gender (Irudayam et al. 2011; Shah 2001; Viswanathan 2005; Chakravarti 2003). While stories of exploitation by landlords and contractors at work or by drunken husbands at home are commonplace, what is left out is the women's own representation of their everyday lives, which is often contradictory, and speaks of victimhood alongside the exercise of strategic choices (Geetha 2000; Viramma, Racine and Racine 2000; Bama 2000).
- 4 Control over marriage and fertility decisions have been identified as key indicators of women's autonomy and status in India (Dyson and Moore 1983; Dube 2003; Jejeebhoy 2000; Rege et al. 2013). Historically, Dalit and landless households have been considered as cases where more egalitarian gender relations are possible, in terms of physical freedom, marital mobility and companionate marriages, largely driven by their material poverty, and the need for women to work alongside their men (Deshpande 2011; Dube 2003). This was indeed noticeable in my research context, consisting of a cluster of five villages in the Palladam block of Thiruppur district, with self-arranged or "love" marriages reported only by the Dalits. The dominant Gounders (with "Other Backward Caste" classification) acknowledged that young people now had several opportunities to meet and get to know each other prior to marriage, especially in higher education, but love marriages were not encouraged. In fact, they were punished, including through disinheritance and ostracism from the community.²
- 5 Simultaneously, however, reproductive success, especially producing a son, has become central to Dalit identities and marital security. This is an important shift as amongst the Dalits, who served primarily as landless agricultural laborers, sons and daughters were equally valued for their contributions to the household, both in terms of money and emotional support (Rao 2014:90). While it is difficult to date this trend precisely based on the data collected, it is likely to reflect the changing economic context, especially the expansion of the knitwear industry in the 2000s. More jobs were created for men, and migrants from other Tamil Nadu districts and Indian states, who presently constitute about 60 per cent of the labor in the industry (Dorairaj 2010 cited in Heyer 2012).
- 6 Over the past four decades, the location studied has undergone a decline in agriculture due to lowering water tables and an expansion of the Thiruppur industrial cluster, which has become a global center for hosiery and garment production. This has led to a general change in labor relations, with patronage-based, agricultural labor sharply declining. Dalits, especially those who are educated, are unwilling to work in agriculture for low wages and in near-'bonded' conditions for Gounder landlords (Carswell and de Neve 2014; Heyer 2010). For Dalit women, factory work has gained in importance, but given the difficult conditions, such work is seen as a sign of poverty and lack of choice rather than an exercise of agency (Heyer 2014; Rao 2014). Yet women are not a homogenous group, and don't all have the same relations to the production process (Kapadia 1999). In an earlier paper I found that the outcomes of paid work for their sense of self and wellbeing are mediated by factors such as age, education, the social location from which they enter the workforce—and importantly—reproductive success (Rao 2014).

- 7 In a context of relative economic security, for the first time, Dalit women like Mallika, have the possibility of focusing full-time on the tasks of motherhood and the upbringing of their children, at least temporarily, as long as the children are young. Mothering is more than care-giving; it is seen as central to nurturing relations of affection and intimacy, with working-class women—who depend on employment and are unable to stay home with their children—cast as “deficient mothers” (Donner 2008:48). Mallika’s apparent conformity to upper-caste norms of domesticity³ and attention to motherhood has in fact helped strengthen her voice in the conjugal relationship while also enhancing her social worth. While she is not earning at present, her contribution to the production and maintenance of “status” (Papanek 1979), a concept that describes any work undertaken to reproduce the social standing of a household beyond its survival, is recognized. Rather than valorizing motherhood per se, she therefore uses this idea as a status-enhancing strategy.
- 8 Status production varies by caste; the forms it takes also changes over time (Rao 2014). The focus of this paper on Dalit women’s agency in relation to status production, through investments in reproduction, fertility and notions of conjugality, is not entirely new—there is a rich ethnographic literature on women’s work, their health and fertility. What this paper offers is a nuanced insight into women’s strategies for negotiating the very notions of conjugality and respectability, using their sexual and reproductive choices as a lens. Their struggles are located within a changing politico-economic context, which present significant shifts in employment opportunities, education, State social protection and Dalit mobilization. Empowering women in some respects, these larger changes appear to simultaneously consolidate new forms of patriarchy, emphasizing motherhood and reproductive success as central to women’s identity and selfhood, rather than their productive work and income contributions (Rege et al. 2013).
- 9 In the next section, I review the different strands of literature around women’s agency in relation to reproduction, fertility and motherhood, within which I locate my research. Section 3 briefly sets out the methodology adopted and profiles the major caste groups in the locality, while Section 4 outlines the broader changes taking place, particularly in livelihoods and social policy. In sections 5 and 6, I turn to an analysis of a few narratives by Dalit women, complementing this where possible with the voices of their men and other caste women as points of comparison. The focus in these two sections is to explore a) how women use reproduction for a wider exercise of agency in building conjugal partnerships and b) the strategies for dealing with anxieties around infertility and its repercussions for social respectability, apart from material and marital insecurity. Section 7 concludes.

Fertility, reproduction and selfhood

- 10 Two distinct strands are visible in the study of fertility and reproduction in contemporary India. The first, led by demographers and health professionals, emphasizes population control and improved health outcomes. Large datasets such as the National Family Health Surveys have been used to examine women’s reproductive bodies, including the changes in marriage age, fertility behavior and the adoption of birth control measures, and their links to women’s autonomy and status (Jejeebhoy 2000; Kishor and Gupta 2009; Deshpande 2011). Women’s bodies are mainly valued in relation to motherhood, as

reflected in both state policy discourses and health services that prioritize reproductive health for women (Whitehead 1996; Anandhi 2000).

- 11 The second strand consists of more sociological and anthropological work, focusing on women's lived experiences of production and reproduction (Jeffery, and Jeffery 1994), including their implications as status-markers. Marriage and reproduction are not just central elements of selfhood, but also serve as boundary markers between social groups. Amongst the upper castes, in upholding caste purity and hierarchy, they lead to an emphasis on restrained behavior and control of women's sexuality (Dube 2003; Uberoi 1996; Chakravarti 1996; Dube, Leacock, and Ardener 1986). Yet conformity with such norms does not guarantee women's autonomy or voice, shaped as these are by a host of social relations mediated by residential patterns, closeness to natal kin, and perhaps education or employment (Jeffery, and Jeffery 1994; Unnithan 2010).
- 12 Despite the freedom of movement and relative autonomy arising from women's economic roles and functions, recent analyses indicate an erosion in the sense of equality amongst Dalit men and women (Irudayam et al. 2011; Rege 2006). Kapadia (1995) nuances this analysis, pointing out that the control over women's sexuality and appropriate behavior becomes a concern when a household is upwardly mobile and women's withdrawal from work adds to male status (p. 174). In the context under study, this upward mobility is not just about male status; rather it lays claim to the benefits of globalization, and the ways in which it produces distinctive identities—both political and social (cf Donner 2008). Both the nature of jobs and consumer practices have changed in the locality—from agricultural labor, most women, especially younger women, now have experience with factory jobs based on modern management practices. They are media-savvy and aspire to new forms of consumerism, in the areas of food, clothing, and indeed choice of educational or health facility.
- 13 Women's subjectivities are not universal and static; they shift over their life course and with changes in their immediate personal and local context. Amongst the Dalits, it is assumed that individual interests are subordinated to those of caste and kin collectivities, and only become important when articulated in opposition to other groups (Rege 2006). While Dalit women do articulate concerns around violence and gender subordination (Rao 2015), given the persistent inequalities they face in the labor and wage markets, they simultaneously seek to build their moral reputation and agency around reproductive success. Kalpana Ram (2000) makes a similar point in noting how within rapidly changing macro-contexts, such as amongst the fishing communities in coastal Tamil Nadu, notions of "modernity" are framed through a discourse of feminine morality, "a morality produced by acceptance and internalization of a hard and rigorous disciplining of one's bodily subjectivity" (p. 292).
- 14 Amongst the middle classes, women's employment has now become central to the making of a "modern" persona, yet their sense of self, including professional success, continues to be linked to their family's prestige (Belliappa 2013). Professional women's everyday practices are often contradictory, combining trying work regimes with efforts to reproduce family norms and values, seen as contributing to a "respectable femininity" (Radhakrishnan 2009; Thapan 2009). Respectability involves a complex set of practices defined by appropriate behavior, language, and appearance, apart from the visible espousal of social rules and moral codes, which enable people to be framed in ways that justify the unequal distribution of resources (Skeggs 1997). The symbols of respectability, however, do not automatically lead to respect, as seen in the treatment meted out by

others; this involves mutuality, which emerges from both self-confidence and recognition by others (Sennett 2003). In fact rather than accepting variability in experiences, social responsibility now calls for an adherence to patriarchal codes, relating particularly to sexual and bodily discipline. What emerges is a sense that the idioms of the family, of reproduction and conjugality, are important responses to broader socio-economic and livelihood changes, and enable individuals and households to gain both status and respectability.

- 15 Beverley Skeggs' (1997) insight that legitimate middle-class femininity becomes in itself a kind of symbolic capital that women, especially from the working classes, seek to embody, could help explain the greater emphasis on domesticity and motherhood amongst Dalit women in my research context. Rather than signifying enhanced subordination, it could reflect creative navigations and renegotiations of both conjugal and wider social relations of caste and class (cf Heyer 2014). It is important to point out here that relations of reproduction are not confined to the household, but rather are crucial to an understanding of economic and political institutions more broadly (Engels [1884] 1972). As Ginsburg and Rapp (1995) have argued, "reproduction provides a terrain for imagining new cultural futures and transformations, through personal struggle, generational mobility, social movements and the contested claims of powerful religious and political ideologies" (p. 2).
- 16 Edholm, Harris and Young's (1977) analytical distinction between social reproduction, reproduction of the labor force, and human or biological reproduction, is useful in pointing to the different pathways available to people, especially women, for improving their life chances. Lower-status groups, such as the Dalits in the studied context, find a plurality of ways in which they can use consumerism and social practices—including surrounding childcare and parenting—that draw on high caste ideals of chastity and domesticity alongside notions of appropriate work, to craft "respectable" identities for themselves. Through their inventive use in their everyday practices of the symbols and language created by the elites, they give them a different meaning, challenging dominant meanings rather than just reproducing a dominant practice (de Certeau 1984:32). Here, women's agency cannot be understood in binary terms, as constraints and freedoms, resistance and subordination. Shaped by the opportunities available to them, their personal and social circumstances, as well as their need for peace and stability in their lives, it is a complex mix of both the active and passive, with endurance itself a choice, albeit a difficult one (Sangari 2002; Reader 2007; Rao 2015).
- 17 In this paper, I unpack the everyday struggles of Dalit women, and their negotiations in the domain of the family, in the studied context, to demonstrate that while the "domestication" of women is visible within Dalit households, this is not driven by upper-caste, brahmanical ideologies or status considerations alone, rather it is embedded within changing economic and societal contexts. The successful upbringing of a few children (especially their education) is valued as a potential pathway for upward mobility, more than women's monetary contributions. Rather than establishing that Dalit women have no agency, or that it is confined to child bearing and rearing, I highlight the ways in which they use their new domesticity to negotiate their status more broadly, drawing on the care and concern of their partners.

Methodology and sample

- 18 This paper is based on empirical evidence collected from a cluster of five villages in Thiruppur district, Tamil Nadu, in 2009–10.⁴ Seeking to understand the nature of intra-household resource allocations, the project included a household survey of 400 rural couples, as well as in-depth interviews with 40 of these couples, alongside focus-group discussions and key-informant interviews at each site. Men and women were interviewed separately by male and female researchers, both as part of the survey and during the in-depth interviews, in order to gauge their perceptions about their own and their spouse's contributions to the household, their relative access to a range of assets and information, their work and life experiences, and who had the final say in household decisions and allocations.
- 19 As a Tamil-speaking Indian woman, I could speak to both women and men; however, on this particular issue of reproduction and the “domestic realm,” women were both more expansive and open. Interviews often ran on for over two hours, as the women were keen to talk about their lives; men however were more reticent, even with male researchers. This difference in terms of the gendered nature of “voice” and articulation on particular issues is in fact a methodological constraint confronting much of gender/feminist research (Jackson 2012). Without specific attention to male insecurities in relation to infertility, central to their masculinities (Tolley 2015), social problems around violence, alcoholism and extra-marital relationships, will be difficult to address.
- 20 Couples displaying diverse patterns of decision-making were selected for the in-depth work. They included different caste groups, age and education levels, as well as employment statuses. Dalits constitute around 19 per cent of the population of Tamil Nadu. They however constituted 35 per cent of our survey sample and 42.5 per cent (17 out of 40 households) were included in the qualitative research, given our overarching focus on poverty and development. In the research site, the lowest-ranked Arunthathiyars, locally-known as Madharis, constituted the majority-group of Dalits. The remaining population included two distinct groups amongst the Other Backward Castes (OBCs): the landowning Gounders and the handloom-weaving Devanga Chettiars.
- 21 There is a marked contrast in the gendered work and educational status by caste for the research sample. 75 per cent of Dalit women (and 63 per cent below the age of 30)⁵ remain illiterate in contrast to 29 per cent of OBC women in general (literacy is higher amongst the Gounders, but the survey data was not disaggregated by sub-caste), a pattern observed in Tamil Nadu as a whole (Swaminathan 2002). Most Madharis, men and women, are casual wage workers, and only a small proportion work as annual paid farm servants (*pannaiyals*). Their wages however are unequal, with women earning around half that of men for similar work (NSSO 2010). Interestingly, for the first time perhaps, Madhari women, at least those in their reproductive years, were able to drop out, even if only temporarily, from hard manual work, with 25 per cent reporting themselves as not active in the workforce, or engaged only in domestic work.
- 22 The Gounders, an agricultural caste, owning most of the land in the area, work on their own farms, set up enterprises like power looms and poultry farms or work in factories on both regular and casual contracts. Gounder women, especially older ones, work on their farms and supervise Madhari labor when required, while the younger-generation women seek regular work in or around the village, especially as teachers. The Devanga Chettiars

are largely self-employed in weaving. The women all support their husbands' loom work—preparing thread, and weaving themselves at times. Around 35 per cent of women from these groups reported themselves as not active or engaged only in domestic work.

A context of change

- 23 Describing changes in Iruvelpattu (Villupuram district) over the 20th century (1916–2008), Harriss, Jeyaranjan and Nagaraj (2010) note that over the last 25 years, [a] diversification of the rural economy, [b] Dalit political mobilization and [c] state welfare provision have together contributed to a decline in hegemonic landlord control over village life and enhanced class and caste mobility. While sufficient evidence of Dalit political mobilization could not be collected in this research context, the other two factors were obviously present. There is a diversification of employment, with jobs—particularly for men—much more easily available in the Thiruppur industrial cluster, but also in decentralized production units, power looms, poultry farms and plantations, in the rural areas. As one Gounder landlord noted:

Till the 1970s, tobacco was the main crop and it was quite profitable. In 1975, the government started a campaign against tobacco. Agriculture became impossible, as the water table too had gone down. Many Gounders sold their land and invested in power looms; later some set up poultry farms. Employment opportunities have increased, but the labor now want to relax, not work hard, so it is a big risk for us employers. They take advances as a condition of work and use it to buy cell phones, vehicles and alcohol—the money disappears in a flash. We now have a strong association of power-loom owners here. You must have read in the papers about our strike. There is a demand for higher wages, but with only small margins, there is no way we can pay this.

The above narrative points to labor mobilization and the demand for higher wages by Dalit workers. Given the competitiveness of the power-loom industry in the locality and the tight labor market, the Gounder owners face a situation of labor scarcity. Yet, they were unwilling to pay the wages demanded by the workers, resulting in a stalemate and ultimately a strike by the owners. Several Madhari men were without work during our fieldwork, yet stuck to their demands regarding wages and working conditions. A clear change in economic relations between the Gounders and Madharis is visible, wherein the latter's pliability can no longer be counted on. The changing nature of the social ties between Madharis and Gounders raises a question regarding why the former then appear to be adopting the patriarchal social norms common amongst the latter and other mid-level castes.

- 24 Apart from the difficulties of combining factory work with their reproductive responsibilities (Rao 2014:86), Madhari women have been supported in their mothering and domestic roles by state social protection and welfare services. Tamil Nadu has largely maintained its allocation to nutrition and social services (Heyer 2012), which enables poor women to take time off work, if needed, without becoming totally dependent on their men. Amongst many, two schemes that have had a significant impact on gender relations and choices are the universal Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy Maternity Benefit scheme. While there was a worksite set up under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), this was mentioned less by women in their narratives. The PDS provides the staple food rice free of cost to below-poverty-line households. This has facilitated access to basic grains,

however, with severe inflation in the prices of all other commodities—pulses, oil, vegetables—and unpredictable male contributions—performing the task of preparing a complete meal can still pose a challenge for women (Rao 2015). It has nevertheless eased the pressure on women for meeting basic survival needs.

- 25 The Maternity Benefit scheme directly addresses women's reproductive lives, providing support to poor women for a period of nine months, three during late pregnancy and child-birth and six after birth. The amount of assistance was doubled from Rs 6,000 to Rs 12,000 per birth for the first two births in May 2011.⁶ Ravindran and Balasubramanian (2012) in their five-district study, found that only 25 per cent of Dalit and landless women were able to access financial benefits under the scheme, partly due to the long process of documentation and partly due to the dominant landholding castes serving as mediators, providing both information and support for filling-in the required forms. While precise data from the survey is not available, during qualitative interviews, Madhari women did not raise any particular issues in this regard—their narratives were largely positive.
- 26 Along with these social protection schemes, the State has also distributed several freebies over the past decade. Almost every household has a television, a mixer grinder, cooking gas, a power supply and a concrete house with a tiled roof. Targeted largely at women, they seek to reduce the burden of domestic work. Most of the Madhari men have bicycles; a few have mopeds or motorbikes. The OBCs, especially the Gounders, additionally have modern fixtures in their kitchen and living room, and usually a motorbike, and for the best off, a car. Their houses are much larger, as they own land, and usually some cattle.

Fertility and reproductive choice: women's narratives

- 27 This section presents detailed narratives of a few women, reflecting on different dimensions of fertility and reproduction, the securities and insecurities entailed therein, but also how this contributes to their agency and sense of self in relation to both conjugal relationships and household-status mobility. While focusing on Madhari women, I compare their perspectives with those of Gounder women, also providing insight into male views when possible.
- 28 29-year-old Jaya, quiet and controlled in personality, was married to her mother's brother's son at the age of 16. She said,

He works as a plumber and can earn about Rs 1,000 a week, but now his company is incurring losses, so his earnings are reduced. I too have been working for the past six months in a power loom owned by the Gounder in our village. I dropped out of school after grade 5 because I was poor in maths and could not tolerate constant scoldings by the teacher. It was the tradition in my place that teenage girls (post-pubertal) would stay at home, helping with household work. My uncle suddenly died (my aunt had died earlier), and since I had dropped out of school, my mother, who wished me to marry his son, got us married, so I could look after him. A year later we had a son.

Jaya's mother is tasked with controlling her sexuality following puberty, identifying a suitable groom, and getting her married once she dropped out of school. The emphasis on "tradition" here can be understood in the context of upward mobility to which her family aspired (cf Kapadia 1995). Her grandparents had a few head of cattle and a plot of land (two acres), and lived reasonably comfortably in their life. Her father had studied up to the 9th grade and was offered a teacher's job, but due to household pressures at that time, he didn't accept it. Nevertheless, her parents did seek to educate their daughters and give

Jaya a better life. She was socialized to look after her husband, but as she points out at the beginning of the narrative, this includes not just personal care, but also earning an income to compensate for his reduced earnings. She continued,

My husband does not have any bad habits like smoking or alcohol, but occasionally I think he drinks outside before coming home. I find him brushing his teeth at night, saying that his mouth does not feel fresh. From the day of our marriage, he has given me all his earnings, and continues to do so. Along with the weekly provisions, he would also purchase my favorite milk sweet and some jasmine flowers. Three years ago he took me to a famous sari shop called Ganapathi Silks and bought me a lovely green sari for my birthday. I was really happy.

There is only one thing I feel really bad about. My son is now 13 years old, but I have not conceived again. My husband's sister and grandmother scold me as if it is only my fault. They suspect I am taking birth control pills⁷ and don't want a second child because I might lose my beauty. This is not true. In our community, if anyone takes a bath daily and wears a neat and clean sari, people start gossiping about her. My husband however treats me well.

Jaya started on a positive note about her husband, although she gradually admitted to some drinking and (as we shall see in the next extract) some violence. She is quick to add that he seeks to compensate for this by not only handing over his earnings and fulfilling his provider role, but also buying her gifts. The simultaneous display of authority and affection is seen as an acceptable part of the conjugal relationship. What troubles her in relation to her inability to conceive a second child, however, is the interpretation of the attention to her body and dress as an expression of an individual's sexual desire (John and Nair 2000), such attention being a signifier of morally reprehensible conduct (Skeggs 2009:100). Normatively, women's sexuality is seen as exclusively harnessed to the project of reproduction, rather than sexual desire, hence she is scolded and criticized for her attention to her body (cf Kannabiran, and Kannabiran 2003). In fact, affinal relatives and other women in the locality see her as arrogant in seeking to maintain her own beauty and figure in order to fulfill her sexual desires, rather than producing another child. Her husband's purchase of flowers and saris for her has perhaps also evoked a sense of jealousy. Apart from the usual policing of women's behavior, the remarks surrounding her immorality reflect resentment by other women of the conjugal support and spousal affection she seems to enjoy (cf Unnithan-Kumar 2001). While not necessarily reflecting a change in social morality, her peers' behavior does reflect an intensification of jealousy due to the relatively secure economic status of the household, and the companionship she enjoys in conjugal relations. She continued,

Only once, when my son was two years old, we had a major fight. My husband has many cousins (teenage girls); they used to sit on his lap, and take money from him. I didn't like this and told him that I can't live with him if he continues like this. On that day he hit me. I didn't eat for two days and tried to commit suicide by pouring kerosene on my body. My neighbors came, gave me a bath, and sent me to my grandparent's house. Meanwhile, my husband went to my parent's home in search of me. They all got worried; my father cried and so did my husband. He felt lost without me. I realized then my value and consoled him saying "You are not an orphan as long as I am with you." I will never leave him even if there is a big problem.

This incident gave Jaya the opportunity to renegotiate several elements of her relationship with her husband. While female sexuality is to be controlled post-marriage, male flirting and even promiscuity is seen as permissible. She challenged this, but when he didn't respond favorably, out of sheer desperation, she attempted suicide and left his home. It is only once he realized her value and agreed to meet her expectation of loyalty

from him that she returns. While Jaya was unable to convince her husband to undergo treatment for infertility, as discussed in the next section, she managed to convince him to buy a plot of land in her name and build a house close to her parents' home. They had to take out a large loan for this purpose, but now she has more friends, greater support and faces fewer sarcastic comments about her "good looks." Conjugal loyalty has helped her exercise considerable agency in improving her life and to her, therefore, symbolize respectability and security as well as an expression of her self-identity.

- 29 Her husband, Chinnasamy, who works as a plumber with a daily wage of Rs 150, is hardly educated. He confirmed that he was very close to his wife, and they discussed all matters; in fact she managed all the money they both earned, and he had received a lot of assistance from his wife's parents. When asked about why they had stopped with one child, he responded: "According to his horoscope it is not good to have another child after our son turned 12 years of age." He then changed the topic, and mentioned that as his son was now in secondary school (grade 8), his wife too had started working on a power loom so they could pay for his tuition and other expenses, alongside repaying the loan for constructing their house. While emphasizing their companionate relationship and support for each other in both production and reproduction, he felt uncomfortable talking about the difficulties of conceiving a second child, and blamed it on his horoscope or fate.

- 30 Quite different in her actions and strategies is 20-year-old Amritha who, having studied up to the 10th grade, is one of the more educated Madhari women. Having worked earlier on a tea plantation, she proudly mentioned completing three months of computer lessons. She said:

I am very frank with him; if I have anything on my mind, I say that to him. I don't talk about it outside. He knows this, so he supports me. It is only with his support that I can gain respect in society, especially with my in-laws. My mother-in-law kept squabbling with me, so my husband suggested we move out and set up our own home, even though he is their only son. Once I was upset because he forgot to wish me on my birthday, so I got up crying, and left home early for work. He felt bad, so took a loan from his company to buy me a beautiful mobile phone as a gift. He also bought me a cake, sweets and some flowers.

Amritha is young and capable, and while working in a spinning mill herself, she has focused on building conjugal solidarity and mutuality through being open and frank with her husband, seeking his support for whatever she does. She seems to give and expect affection as a person in her own right, and does not just see herself as a machine for reproduction. She is confident of her husband's loyalty—he has given up drinking, hanging around with his friends, and goes to work regularly. As she is more educated than him (he has completed grade 8), he genuinely feels that she gives him good advice and is committed to building their life together. He confirmed this, saying,

My wife has helped me control my temper and reduce my smoking and drinking habits. She manages the household money, but discusses everything with me. We are as close as when we got married. We have no secrets.

The separation of both living and cooking spaces from her in-laws, to a single room her husband has built just opposite their house, has been one way to expand both her own space and build conjugal solidarity and intimacy between spouses. The daughter-in-law is expected to take responsibility for domestic tasks alongside working for wages, as it is not just caste and class identity but one's gender positioning that decides what is socially acceptable and appropriate behavior (Guru 1995). The spatial separation, in this case, also reflects a shift in kin relations, individualizing notions of motherhood to biological bonds,

from wider social and cultural practices (Donner 2008:38). Realizing that the responsibility for child-care will now primarily be hers, and not shared by her in-laws, Amritha seriously reflects on timing. She continued:

I don't want a child for at least two years. We are deep in debt. My husband took a loan of Rs 30,000 for our marriage (a love marriage). My parents too took a loan. We both need to work to repay ours, and then help my parents. I started working two months after our marriage at a mill at Palladam. My husband works in an export company. But work is not always available, hence earnings aren't assured. I would like to stay at home for a while when I have a child, so we need to save.

Another way of strengthening their conjugal bond has been through sharing the responsibility for loan repayment and managing the home. Her husband appreciates this and therefore doesn't mind acceding to her wish to postpone having their first child until they are financially secure. This is significant as producing a child within the first year of marriage is seen as the sign of a man's virility and equally a woman's fertility, and is the cultural and social expectation, as seen in Jaya's case. Amritha wants to continue studying and complete her computer course, so she can get a better job. Her husband has promised to support her, but at present, this plan is on hold. While the link between education and women's agency is unclear (Jeffery and Jeffery 1994; Chanana 1988), Amritha seeks to use her skills to enhance conjugal solidarity and reciprocal support, rather than independence at all cost.

- 31 I started this paper with a narrative by Mallika. Apart from the early experience of work and reproductive success, she was also able to convince her husband, working at a power loom until the recent strike, that two children was enough. She is not working now, and they have a debt of close to Rs 10,000. She noted:

My son was born by caesarean section in the government hospital. I got Rs 3,000 from the government after the birth. Following the delivery, I opted for a laparoscopy, so I don't get pregnant again. We want to educate our two children well.

While wanting to go back to work, especially given the uncertainty of her husband's earnings, her decision to opt for sterilization provides her control over her own body, and the ability to enjoy a normal, sexual relationship with her husband without the constant fear of pregnancy. It challenges the singular link between sex and reproduction for women, which is quite different from male indulgence in sex for pleasure (Uberoi 1996). It also gives her the confidence to negotiate with her husband to provide the best available opportunities to their children, in this case, the possibility of studying in private schools. Additionally, she realizes that multiple pregnancies can affect not just her health, but also more generally her ability to work and live well (Sharma and Vanjani 1994).

- 32 What becomes clear from these narratives is that Madhari women use their bodies, especially the capacity for biological reproduction, to negotiate decisions on several issues affecting their everyday lives. These include whether or not to work, the timing of work, expanding physical and social space—either through splitting the conjugal household, or moving closer to their own natal kin, purchasing a plot of land in their own name, changing their husband's behavior, controlling household finances, and so on. Within their material context of economic insecurity and non-stop drudgery, they seek to transform their conjugal relationship into one of genuine respect and reciprocity (cf Butler 1993), even by adopting practices of “domesticity” that appear to reflect patriarchal control (Guru 1995). Their concern is not with demographic variables of age at marriage, contraceptive use or even fertility per se, but of ways and means to strengthen the conjugal bond and build an equitable and meaningful partnership. This conjugal

bonding also serves to subtly challenge the domination of upper caste men over Dalit women. While none of the women interviewed reported sexual abuse by a factory owner, several of them did speak of the lack of choice with regard to work and the long working hours that made it impossible to have a normal work/life balance, especially if they had children.

Infertility, childlessness and gender relations

- 33 Apart from daily violence, the costs of childlessness can be high, leading to rejection and separation as revealed by 30-year-old Indrani. She works as a cleaner in a studio, earning Rs 50 per day, while her husband works as an agricultural labor, earning about double that amount, when work is available. She said:

After one and a half years of marriage, we did not have a child. My husband used to shout at me everyday, “you have no child, why have I married you?” Listening constantly to this refrain, I got angry and went to my parent’s home. A month later, my father-in-law came and asked me to return. He assured my parents that he would keep me well, so my parents sent me back. We went to a Siva temple and I offered my hair to the God if I conceived. After that I had a child and now I have three. My husband is very affectionate towards me.

In terms of health-seeking efforts, Indrani mentions visiting a temple, and offering her hair to Siva if she conceives. Spiritual healers are often the first port of call for women confronted by the social aspersions of infertility, which construct them as both incomplete and inauspicious. Ram (2013) provides a detailed account of spirit possession as an exercise of agency by rural Tamil women going through some form of crisis in their experience of marriage and maternity. While I did not encounter any examples of spirit possession, this is part of a plethora of everyday practices that helps women confront their sense of responsibility for reproduction (pregnancy and contraception), and shame at the failure to do so.

- 34 Jaya has been unable to conceive a second child. Secondary sterility can have multiple causes, reproductive tract infections being a major one. As Unnithan (2010) notes in her Rajasthan study, this is quite a widespread phenomenon, affecting 15–18 per cent of rural women, yet health services rarely focus on it. Women therefore end up going to a host of local healers as well as private medical practitioners. Visits to temples and local healers provide not just a lower-cost option to expensive infertility treatment in private clinics, but working within the same cultural framework of shared beliefs about bodily processes, the evil eye, and the social connectedness of a person’s physical and mental state, they also provide relief from anxiety to both women and men (Unnithan-Kumar 2001). Given the stigma attached to infertility, Jaya has tried all options. As she notes:

We have been on many pilgrimages and visited temples in order to try to have another child. We also consulted a doctor who said there is some problem with my husband and he needs an operation. But my husband is not interested. He says, “I don’t need any treatment for another child, instead of spending money on treatment we can spend on our child.” He wants him to study to be an engineer. Yet I would like to have a girl. We went to an astrologer, he said that my son would have a sibling in his twelfth year, but this has now passed. If it had been a problem with me, I could have asked for help. Since it is in my husband, I have not spoken about it to anybody.

While frustrated at not being able to have a daughter, and realizing that her husband’s infertility contributed to the rebukes she got, she nevertheless uses this well-kept secret,

to negotiate with him on a host of key strategic life decisions, as will be discussed in the last section. Taking him up on his commitment to devote money to their child's education, she has arranged private tuitions for him, even though, given her husband's declining earnings, this has meant her resuming work. Alongside these negotiations, the visible display of health-seeking efforts through visits to temples and astrologers, performing rituals when required, helps women like her overcome individual stigma, alongside repairing social relations.

- 35 While the threat of separation due to childlessness is real amongst the Madharis, status considerations make this more difficult amongst the middle and upper castes. Thangam, a 40-year-old Gounder woman, did not have a child until three years after marriage. She was worried. She said, "If there is no child to a woman, society will talk ill of her. She will have no respect." Her husband confirmed, "When any one meets us, they don't ask about wealth, only about how many children we have and how they are doing. They will comment if a woman has no children."
- 36 Given the revaluation of "reproduction" (Edholm et al. 1977) as a significant contribution made by women to household status production, there is enhanced pressure for success in this realm. Responses, however, are different across castes. Amongst the Madharis, childlessness affects women's security, status and voice, raising the chances of violence, and separation, in their lives. Surprisingly, the narratives of the Gounder women, while also pointing to childlessness as a reason for lack of respect and shame, do not reflect a similar level of threat in terms of marital security. This could be a result of upper-caste status norms, which look down on separation and remarriage, alongside the availability of fewer eligible women for marriage in these groups. As Thangam candidly noted, "Girls are few amongst the Gounders. For 40 boys, there may only be 20 girls, hence following divorce there is no guarantee that a man will be able to find another wife."⁸ Yet in both instances, regardless of caste, women seek multiple sources of treatment, both individual—as reflected in their visits to medical practitioners—but more importantly, social—be it visits to temples, astrologers, or ritual actions like feeding the poor.

Conclusion

- 37 There are several layers of representation in assembling social reality, both individual and collective. The notions of public and private too are constructed at multiple levels—political, economic, but also discursive (Sangari and Vaid 1989). At the policy level, there is an emphasis on women as mothers, with state-provisioning of basic food and amenities increasingly encouraging and supporting women in their reproductive roles. While laboring is central to Dalit identity for both men and women—perhaps as a result of poverty, social exclusion and a life of hardship—in an economic context where employment opportunities for men are expanding, but for women (especially those who are married with children) there is a deep disadvantage within global production systems, social norms seem to be changing. New forms of domesticity are emerging, with Madhari women—who previously had no choice but to work—now dropping out of the workforce when their children are young. While this could be interpreted as an enhancement of patriarchal controls (Irudayam et al. 2011), women seem to be negotiating the practice of these domesticity norms in plural ways, choosing from a range of possibilities according to their needs.

- 38 First, their early experience of paid work enables them to enter and exit the labor market as the need arises, so they are not completely dependent on their men for financial support. In fact, most Madhari women aspire to perform exclusively domestic roles only when their children are very young, and then return to work, hence making their period of “domesticity” short-lived. In conjunction, their acceptance of domesticity is shaped by the nature of paid work available. With a decline in agriculture, work opportunities mainly lie in the industrial sector, and therefore not just far from the village, but also demanding in terms of both time and work schedules. While paid labor continues to be valued, especially regular jobs as in the case of professional middle-class women, children, especially sons, are valued as an investment in future security. Hence, during the reproductive years, it is domesticity and child-care that gives women both autonomy and status.
- 39 Secondly, the scope of the “domestic” has expanded to include several spaces and institutions—education and health, social welfare, savings groups and community networks (Rao 2012). In fact, for women, the focus on domesticity and “looking after their children” does not imply lack of control over their mobility or confinement to the home. Rather it demonstrates the recognition that if education is to succeed as a pathway to upward mobility, then children, especially those who are first-generation learners, need adequate support. Women’s sphere of influence then involves undertaking a host of tasks that facilitate childcare and child development (including keeping the children well-groomed, taking them to nursery schools and later private tuitions), as well as engagement with social and religious activities (including visiting temples) that aid social reproduction. Women’s agency is here expressed through the quality of the childcare and opportunities they provide for their children, rather than employment per se. “Domesticity” then emerges as a discursive tool for negotiating conjugality and household reproduction, an option that hardly existed for them earlier. In the process, they alter its meanings, assigning to it different values in terms of knowledge and obligation (de Certeau 1984). Their everyday practices also create spaces for escape and evasion, as reflected in justifying a return to work to support the education of their children.
- 40 Finally, other elements of modernity also challenge patriarchal hegemony. While not discussed in this paper, access to information and ideas through television programming (distributed to every household by the State as an election sop), give greater recognition to the tasks of status production, in particular providing better education and opportunities for their children.
- 41 The narratives presented in this paper draw out the ambiguities in Dalit women’s personal lives, the small, everyday actions undertaken to expand the spaces—physical, social and emotional—available to them for expressing their sense of self and building “respectable” identities. While appearing to conform to middle/upper caste, patriarchal ideologies of honor, shame and appropriate behavior, as embedded in notions of domesticity and motherhood, they are responding not just to the stigma of being “deficient mothers,” but using this as a tool to achieve a longer-term vision of normative and social change based on conjugal loyalty and reciprocity.
- 42 Women are seeking here to reformulate the terms of domesticity within a changing economic and social scenario. The emphasis on reproductive work is used strategically to draw on the care and concern of their partners in order to negotiate a range of issues concerning their lives and livelihoods, be it reforming the man’s drinking and smoking

practices, securing a separate dwelling, controlling household finances, or indeed the decision to join or withdraw from the workforce. There are trade-offs inherent in the choice of subject-position available to these women—as mothers, wives, workers, or just women—and these involve renegotiating definitions of work, domesticity and conjugal loyalty. Whether the focus on domesticity will ultimately negate some of the emancipatory edge from their agency remains to be seen.

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NOTES

1. All names have been changed to maintain anonymity.
2. Interview D. Gounder.
3. The upper castes make a distinction between the domestic space and outside work, devaluing women's labor outside the home, apart from norms around purity and the avoidance of pollution (Chakravarty 2003).
4. RES-167-25-0251: "The Intra-household Allocation of Resources: Cross-cultural Tests, Methodological Innovations and Policy Implications." Funded by DFID-ESRC, the project involved field-level experiments, a household survey and qualitative interviews to explore the question under consideration.
5. Age-wise literacy or work participation data is available on request.
6. This is much higher than the national-level maternity benefit, which offers women Rs 5,000 for one birth.
7. Birth control pills and other forms of contraception are not easily available to these women.
8. In her analysis of sex ratios in Tamil Nadu, Srinivasan (2015) notes that while Coimbatore and Thiruppur districts have a higher child-sex ratio than Tamil Nadu, there is a declining trend between 2001 and 2011. The sex ratios, however, vary according to caste group, with the landowning Gounders having a long history of son preference and daughter elimination. The primacy of land in this patrilineal agrarian community has led to the adoption of the small family norm and strengthened son preference. In a survey of 1,822 households in 2014, she found 755 males for 209 females in the 26+ age group, revealing a significant shortage of brides.

ABSTRACTS

Much of the literature on Dalits, and Dalit women in particular, focuses either on issues of violence, and subordination based on class, caste and gender, or the relative egalitarianism within Dalit households, which arises out of a context of shared hardship. It leaves out the contradictions and negotiations inherent in their everyday lives, of victimhood alongside the exercise of strategic life choices. In this paper, using qualitative data obtained primarily from Dalit women in rural Tamil Nadu, I draw attention to the growing emphasis on conjugal loyalty and (upper-caste) norms of domesticity within Dalit households. Reflecting normative changes based on the ideas of respectability and status, this trend appears to be consolidating new forms of patriarchy. However, contextualizing this phenomenon in relation to changes in the larger political economy, especially the significant shifts in labor relations, education, State social protection and Dalit mobilization, reveals that rather than accepting a subordinate status, Dalit women are strategically using these ideas to negotiate their sexual and reproductive entitlements, and companionate conjugality.

INDEX

Keywords: conjugality, reproduction, respectability, gender, Dalits, Tamil Nadu, India

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